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ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis that the use of swear words by women elicits more negative perceptions of the speaker than the use of the same words by men. Subjects (undergraduates) read vignettes describing fictitious clients' initial interviews at a mental health center. One described a forty-year old teacher troubled by anxiety, the other a rebellious teenager. Two aspects were varied, sex of the client and his/her use of swear words: none, mild or moderate. Twenty subjects responded to each variant. Subjects rated perceived problems of each client on a five-point scale. Data for each problem were analyzed with a 2 X 3 analysis of variance. A pattern of results emerged which was internally consistent, but counter to prediction. The mildly swearing woman and the mildly swearing female teenager were perceived as the better adjusted of the various clients. Interpretation must be tentative, but it is possible that subjects may have perceived mild deviations from the norm as signs of strength in females. Undergraduates' misperceptions of the psychotherapy setting may have contributed to the finding. Results suggest that swearing men and women are perceived differently, and that evaluators' background and perception of the speech context contribute to judgments. (Author)

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Why Ladies Don't Swear

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March 1977

Descriptions of the female style of English speech often note that women are less likely than men to use swear words, and instead are inclined to select weaker expressions for strong feelings (Lakoff, 1975; Jespersen, 1922). I have argued earlier (Tyler, 1975) that this difference between men's and women's speech is very difficult to demonstrate in controlled empirical research. Such expressions are most likely to be produced in informal situations which are almost impossible for the investigator to penetrate without destroying their informal nature. Nevertheless, some data exist to support the claim that women are less likely than men to swear. Foote and Woodward (1972) report that when undergraduates were asked to produce as many "dirty, vulgar, foul or generally objectionable words or phrases" as they could think of, reporting alone and anonymously, men outproduced women by a factor of 50%. In a field of study of well educated Caucasian housewives at a bridge party (Menzel & Tyler, 1977) my colleagues and I have found no examples of swear words, but a number of expressions such as "goodness gracious" or "my heavens" used to express surprise or displeasure.

Two types of explanations have been offered for women's using a feminine style which includes the avoidance of swearing. One line of reasoning asserts that women simply do not like to swear. Jespersen (1922) argued that women instinctively shrink from "coarse and gross expressions" (1922, p. 246), and saw this

tendency as a representation of a very old sexual taboo. Though this argument sounds rather quaint in Jespersen's words, more contemporary work such as Stanley's analysis of terms for prostitutes (1973) suggests that vulgar words in English quite often refer to women, to the female genitalia, or to sexual functions performed by women. Thus women may avoid using swear words which make insulting references to their own sex. However, this argument cannot account for women's avoidance of other types of swear words.

A second line of reasoning emphasizes the social pressures which impinge on a woman, regardless of her own preferences. Lakoff (1975) argues that as children, girls are socialized by parents and others to behave as "little ladies," avoiding strong language as well as shouting, stomping, or other powerful methods of expressing feelings. As adults, women continue to speak as they were trained to speak. If a woman does not use a female style, "she is ostracized as unfeminine by both men and women" (1975, p. 61). But if she does talk in a ladylike manner, she is treated "as someone not to be taken seriously, of dim intelligence, frivolous and incapable of understanding anything important" (1975, p. 61).

The present study was designed to test a hypothesis derived from Lakoff's ideas. Though I thought that Lakoff's original presentation might have been overstated, it seemed to me very probable that a woman's use of swear words might lead people to form a somewhat different impression of her than of a man who used the same swear words in the same situation. A man who

introjects a few "hells" and "damns" into his conversation might be seen as a very positive, emphatic kind of person, while the same words, coming from a woman, might be taken as evidence for serious underlying feelings of hostility. I further hypothesized that such responses would take the forms of hunches or suspicions about the speaker which the fair-minded observer would be reluctant to report as a considered judgment. It seemed to me that in today's milieu, asking undergraduates--the only subjects readily available--to admit negative suspicions about a swearing woman would be similar to inducing them to admit that they suspected an obese person of laziness or a thin, pale, glasses-wearing individual of being overly fond of books.

My problem, then, was one of inducing people who value fairness and objectivity to provide me with uncensored versions of their more ill-founded judgments about their fellow human beings. Though this seemed no easy task, my years of teaching abnormal psychology to undergraduates suggested a strategy. Provide undergraduates with a hypothetical clinical case study, give them a chance to "play clinician," and they tend to produce remarkably unabashed generalizations about the imaginary clients.

To elicit such spontaneous responses from our subjects, all introductory psychology students, I presented the study as an investigation of "the subtle processes through which psychologists and other clinicians form their first impressions about clients." I said I was looking for the initial hunches or educated guesses which later guide the clinician in making

more thorough evaluations of the client's concerns, and that a first step in our research was to explore an analogous process in educated lay persons such as themselves. The experimenter presented each subject with a booklet containing four fictional reports of imaginary clients' initial visits to a community mental health center. The subjects were to read each case carefully and then to rate the client on a rating scale which asked the extent to which each of several areas of life was a problem for that person. Possible scores ranged from 1 for "very well adjusted in this regard" to 5 for "has severe problems in this regard."

Case histories were adapted from those previously used by Miller (1975). In her research Miller found that these imaginary vignettes were regarded as plausible by a large group of experienced clinicians, and that the clinicians evaluated them much the same, regardless of whether the person was described as being male or female. The vignettes were changed in one regard, however. Where Miller had used only indirect quotations, I added two direct quotations for each clinet. Each subject received two case histories which were actually training items and were not scored. One described a severely disturbed individual who was wandering about the house hallucinating, one a remarkably well-adjusted person who simply wanted help with life planning. These two case studies were intended to acquaint students with the rating scale and provide a perspective for rating the two moderately disturbed individuals described in the critical items.

The first critical case study described a married, forty-year old high school teacher whose chief complaint was severe anxiety, particularly when driving the car, and who also reported a rather cool, detached family life and poor parent-child relationships at home. The second case involved a rebellious high school student referred to the clinic for truancy and poor academic performance. For each case two variables were manipulated, sex of the client and client's use or non-use of swear words. For half the subjects, the teacher was Mr. Andrews, for half, Mrs. Andrews. For half the subjects, the teenager was Paul Patterson, for the other half, Paula Patterson. Three levels of the swearing variable were also manipulated; with swear words selected from those commonly heard on the campus where the study was conducted:

Non-swearing: no swear words

Swearing: One hell and one damn for the adult client, two hells and two damns for the teenager

Really swearing: For the adult, shit load and bloody fucking; for the teenager, fucking, shit load, what the fuck and shitty.

Thus for each case there were six variants: a non-swearing male, a non-swearing female, a swearing male, a swearing female, a really swearing male and a really swearing female. Each subject received only one variant of each of the cases. For example, a subject might receive two training cases, a swearing Mr. Andrews and a non-swearing Paula Patterson. A total of twenty subjects, ten males and ten females, responded to each variant.

The prediction was that the sex and swearing variables would interact so that swearing and really swearing females would be rated as more pathological than non-swearing females, but that swearing would make less difference in the evaluation of males.

A preliminary analysis demonstrated that male and female subjects were responding in similar ways, so the data from subjects of both sexes were analyzed together. Analyses of variance were performed to evaluate the impact of the two variables; sex, with two levels, and swearing, with three levels, on seven rating scale items for the adult client and six for the adolescent client. All comparisons in the analysis were between groups of independent subjects.

For the adult client, statistically significant results were found for two items. For the question asking the extent to which feelings of anger were seen to be a problem for the client, the swearing effect was significant at the .01 level. Regardless of sex, swearers were perceived as having more difficulty with anger than non-swearers. The sex by swearing interaction was also significant at the .01 level and reflects an interesting pattern of results. Both the non-swearing woman and the really swearing woman were rated as having more serious problems regarding angry feelings than were their male counterparts. On the other hand, the woman who swore only mildly emerges as the client rated as least disturbed in this regard . . . considerably less than her male counterpart. The question about the extent to which self-control was a problem for the person also produced a

significant sex by swearing interaction. Its configuration was similar to the one reported for the anger variable. The non-swearing and really swearing women were rated as more disturbed than their male counterparts, but the mildly swearing woman as less disturbed than her male counterpart.

For the adolescent client, significant results were obtained in four of six analyses. For the anger question, the sex effect was significant, with males rated as more disturbed in this regard than females ($p < .05$). Most of this difference seems attributable to the significant sex by swearing interaction ($p < .01$). Really swearing males were rated as being more disturbed in this regard than the really swearing females, who in fact received the lowest score on all the variants. For the self-control question, the swearing variable was significant, with swearers seen as less disturbed than non-swearers ($p < .05$). Again, there was also a significant sex by swearing interaction, with the really swearing female being rated less disturbed than any other clients. Similar sex by swearing interactions were found for the promiscuity variable ($p < .05$) and the overall level of functioning variable ($p < .01$). Each of these is notable for the rating of better functioning for the really swearing female than for any other client rated.

The results are obviously different from what was predicted. No evidence emerged to support the hypothesis that swearing women would be perceived more negatively than swearing men. Instead, a consistent pattern of interactions emerged, with two of the clients, the mildly swearing middle-aged woman and the really

swearing female teenager emerging as the clients rated as best adjusted. This pattern was found on the anger and self-control variables for the adult client, and for the anger, self-control, sexual promiscuity and overall level of functioning variables for the adolescent client. There were also three single variable effects; swearing adults were seen as angrier and male adolescents were seen as angrier. Swearing adolescents were seen as having less difficulty with self-control than were non-swearing adolescents.

In attempting an explanation of the results, which must, because of their unanticipated nature, be quite conjectural, the major task appears to be to make sense of the consistent pattern of two-way interactions and the perceived better adjustment of the mildly swearing woman and the really swearing female teenager. The first step in attempting a tentative explanation is to ask what these two imaginary people have in common. If one accepts the premise that high school teachers are expected to speak more decorously than their pupils, the answer may be that both of these "mental health superstars" swear just a little more than one would expect them to. Perhaps this ability to deviate just a bit from the norm is perceived by college undergraduates as a sign of strength in females. However, more striking deviations from the norm, as in the case of the really swearing female school teacher, elicit negative judgments. The clinical setting may also have influenced subjects' judgments. Students, well read in the "tune in and turn on" school of pop psychology, but unaware of the realities of therapeutic practice, may have

believed that a mild degree of inappropriateness in women's speech is a sign of freedom from unhealthy "uptightness." Since the present study was an exploratory one which set a number of parameters arbitrarily, a full explanation of the phenomenon will require additional research which systematically varies the subject population, perceived setting of the speech act, various demographic variables associated with the client, and the content of the swear words.

However, despite the limitations of the study, some modest conclusions seem to be justified. The interaction of sex of speaker with use or non-use of swear words seems to be an important variable in influencing judgments about people. Swearing men and swearing women are not responded to in the same way. However, the relationship is not a simple one, and the naive hypothesis that swearing women are simply regarded more negatively has definitely not received support. Subjects in the present study appeared to tend to view mild deviations by women from expected behavior patterns to be a sign of strength. Also, it is interesting to note that swearing does not seem always to be a variable whose impact subjects always recognize. When questioned informally after the experiment, many subjects reported that they had not even noticed the presence or absence of swearing, and none admitted that this variable had influenced their judgments. Though this is only an informal observation, it merits further investigation.

In closing I want to report that, while I was tearing out my hair over my "upside down data," an undergraduate in one of

my classes, who knew that I was interested in the study of language, brought me an article from a recent Cosmopolitan Magazine. It advised young women that they could enhance their sexual attractiveness and overall personal effectiveness through selective, judicious swearing--as long as they handled it adroitly and were careful not to swear too much, i.e., more than significant male associates. Maybe Cosmo and the undergraduates are onto something.

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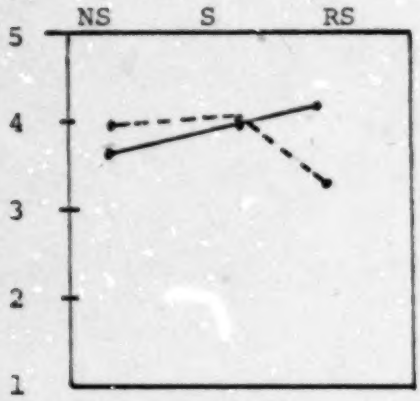
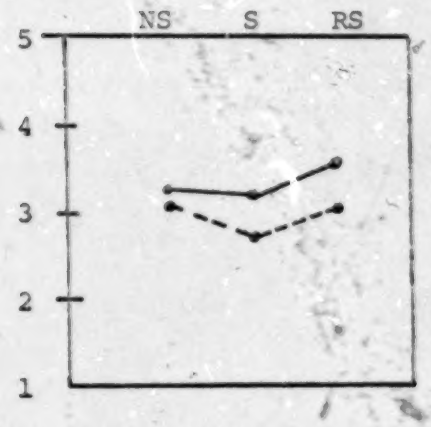
Overall Level of Functioning



sex x swearing: $F=6.82$, $df=2,38$, $p<.01$

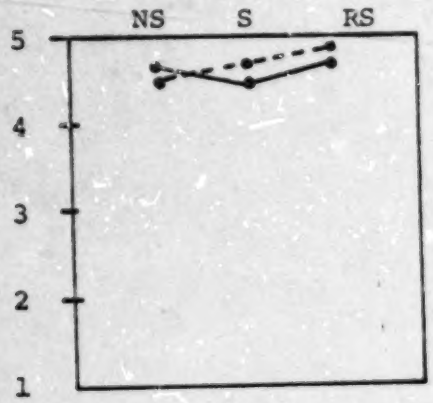
How well liked?



no significant F's

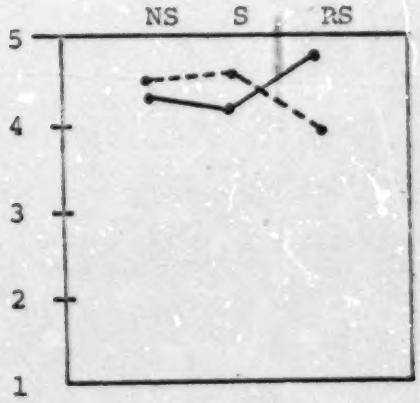
Adolescent Client

Parent-Child Relationships



no significant F's

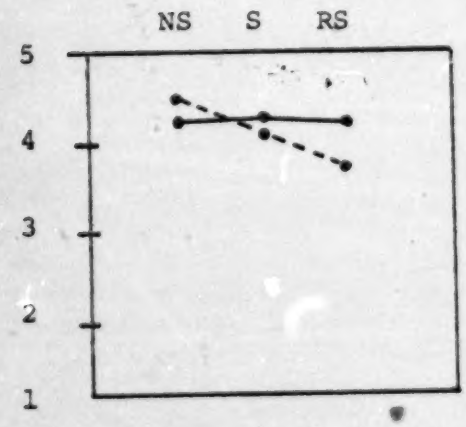
Feelings of Anger



sex: F=5.49, df=1,19, p<.05

sex x swearing: F=6.41, df=2,38, p<.01

Self-Control

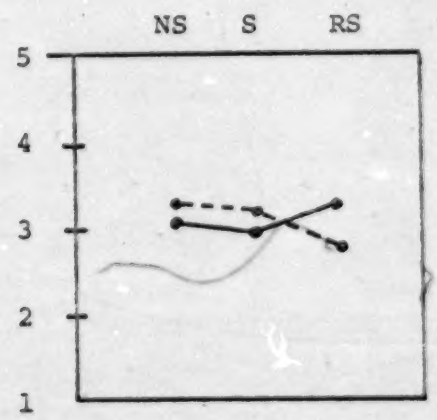


swearing: F=4.84, df=2,38, p<.05

sex x swearing: F=4.16, df=2,38, p<.05

——— = Male Client
- - - - = Female Client

Promiscuity



sex x swearing: F=3,32, df=2,38
p<.05

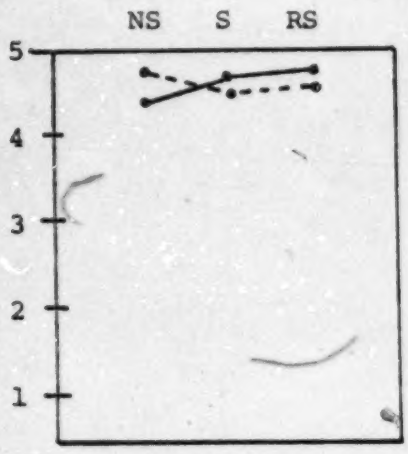
NS = Not Swearing
S = Swearing
RS = Really Swearing

1 = Not at all a problem for this person

5 = Very serious problem for this person

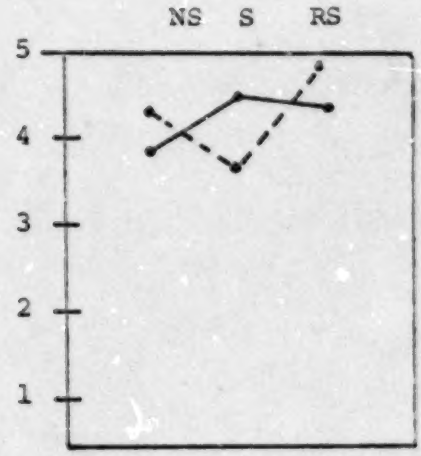
Adult Client

Parent-Child Relationships



no significant F's

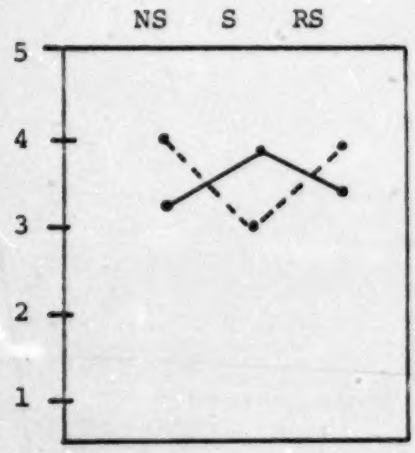
Feelings of Anger



swearing: F=14.93, df=2,38, p<.01

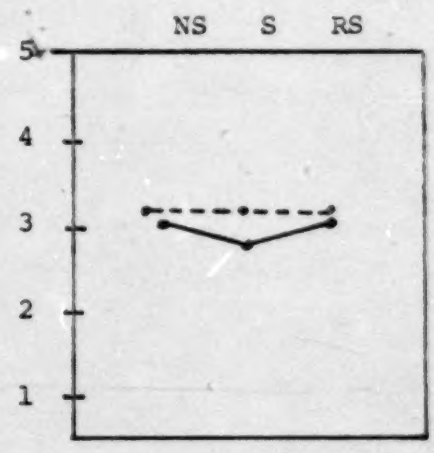
sex x swearing: F=13.84, df=2,38, p<.01

Self-Control



sex x swearing: F=13.12, df=2,38, p<.01

Sexual Promiscuity



no significant F's

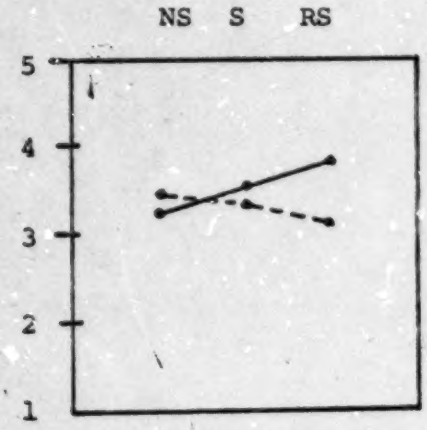
——— = Male Client

- - - - = Female Client

1 = Not at all a problem for this person
5 = Very serious problem for this person

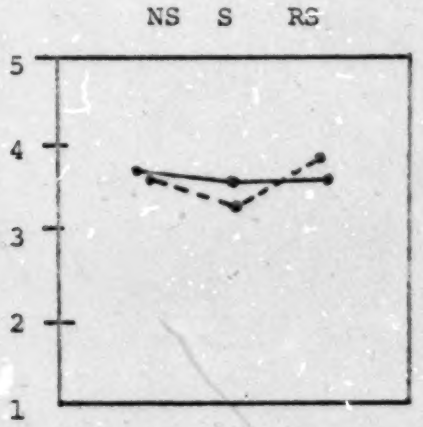
NS = Not Swearing
S = Swearing
RS = Really Swearing

Marital Adjustment



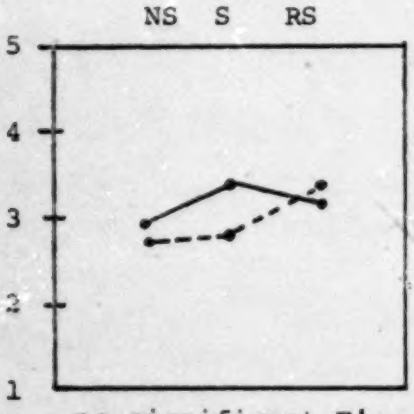
no significant F's

Overall Level of Functioning



no significant F's

How well liked?



no significant F's